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ABSTRACT

The role of participating stakeholders was considered as part of an 18-month research project evaluating the influences of class size (student-teacher ratio) and class mix (mixing disabilities) on special education students' educational outcomes. Stakeholders (N=81) participating in the project represented superintendents, principals, directors of special education, regular teachers, special education teachers, vocational teachers, parents, students with disabilities, and support personnel. Stakeholders were surveyed about their expectations, perspectives, and opinions concerning the project's progress on a regular basis. Results are reported in terms of the influence of stakeholders, costs and benefits of using stakeholders, and stakeholder expectations. Findings indicated that the special interests of various groups were actively advanced; there were heavy financial costs to stakeholder participation; stakeholders were successfully used to develop surveys, refine instruments, gather data, and disseminate findings; and at least 17 different expectation themes were identified. Researchers are urged to weigh the strategy of using all possible stakeholder groups with the needs of the specific project, financial realities, and expected outcomes of a given research project. (DB)

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Using Stakeholders in Special Education Research: How does it Influence the Research Process?

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Using Stakeholders in Special Education Research: How Does it Influence the Research Process?

Objective

Virginia received funds from the Federal Office of Special Education Programs and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS) to conduct an eighteen month research project on the influences of class size (student-teacher ratio) and class mix (mixing disabilities) on special education students' educational outcomes. One interesting feature of this project was the use of stakeholders, early and continuously, throughout the life of the project. Stakeholder groups influence the research process in a number of ways (Ayers, 1987; Greene, 1988), yet little is known about the role stakeholders have in the research process.

Researchers must understand stakeholder-based or utilization-focused evaluation (Murray, 1983) and carefully consider when it is appropriate (Patton, 1988), timely (Gold, 1983), and worthwhile (Greene, 1987). Not all researchers are trained or comfortable using stakeholders when conducting research (Berkowitz, 1992). Therefore, understanding the influence that stakeholders have on the research process is important.

Method

A research team was tasked with designing and conducting the research project (non-experimental -- utilizing quantitative and qualitative research methods), while at the same time 81 stakeholders were invited to join the project. Stakeholders from many special interest group were chosen to participate in the project; stakeholders were present to represented superintendents, principals, directors of special education,

regular, special, and vocational education teachers, parents of children with disabilities, students with disabilities, special education support personnel and specialists, Department of Education professionals, faculty from institutions of higher education, school board members, and professional special education associations. Stakeholders were used as consultants, expert panel members, and disseminators of information. A few stakeholders participated in the projects' data gathering process. Stakeholders were surveyed about their expectations, perspectives, and opinions concerning the project's progress on a regular basis. Extensive data has been gathered and analyzed.

Results and Conclusions

Stakeholder research results were categorized in three ways: the influence stakeholders have in the research process; the administrative and financial cost along with the benefits of using stakeholders; and the establishment of stakeholder expectations.

Influence of Stakeholders

The 81 individuals who were asked to participate as stakeholders in this project came with a wide variety of research backgrounds. Some stakeholders were working, or had previously worked, for the Commonwealth of Virginia as program evaluators; at the other extreme some individuals had a high school education and no background in research. Some stakeholders with background in research methodology were frequently "married" to specific research methodologies (e.g. qualitative vs. quantitative inquiry methods, observation or interview techniques, etc.), research designs, or evaluation strategies, and often found it difficult to readily see the value of another proposed technique. As

might be expected, when large groups of experts are gathered and expected to function as one unit, it took longer to make decisions, and there were disagreements between stakeholders and the researchers as to who should make decisions on technical matters. The length of time needed to make decisions with a large group of stakeholders can also affect the ability of researchers to meet deadlines established by the project staff. Since stakeholders were also chosen to represent various special interest groups in the Commonwealth and those groups had a vested interest in bringing about specific changes, the agendas of many of these groups were actively advanced during the project.

Cost and Benefits of Using Stakeholders

This project was established on the belief that using stakeholders in the early stages of change will foster the implementation of the change; the cost and the benefits of using stakeholders became evident during the 18-month life of the project. The financial costs associated with this endeavor included: renting space to hold five large focus meetings; providing reimbursement for substitutes so that teachers could participate in the study; and paying for stakeholder's travel, meals, and lodging so that they could attend meetings. Since one phase of the project called for gathering of data in six field locations, stakeholders who participated needed to be reimbursed for each 3-day long visit.

In addition to financial costs, inviting stakeholder participation created administrative challenges to the project staff. The following are some examples of issues encountered:

1. Coordinating project focus meetings and public hearings in a varied locations around the state to accommodate people from different geographic regions was time consuming.

2. Communicating and sharing information became an exercise in preparing mass-mailings.

3. Answering questions from 80 or more people, all who had their own perspective and agenda for the study's outcome became very time consuming.

4. Project staff were interrupted from the research process in order to serve as a buffer between child advocacy group representatives and state agency decision makers; staff became involved in educating both groups about the others' concerns and about programmatic issues for students with disabilities.

The benefits using of stakeholders in this research project were evident; stakeholders were successfully used to help develop surveys, refine instruments, gather field research data, encourage participation and support of the project with their special interest groups, and disseminate project research findings.

Stakeholder Expectations

Another unanticipated impact on project staff has been the emotional cost of managing multiple expectations of stakeholders. For example, early in the study stakeholders were asked "What expectations do you have for this study?" At least 17 different expectation themes became evident; a few illustrations are found below.

"Change class size or mix and open up possibilities of interdisciplinary approaches to teaching" - Principal

"Needs of students will be more important than standards themselves. Get rid of labels and talk about level of service." - Director of Special Education

"Verification that class size and mix have no impact on student outcomes." - Director of Special Education

"To learn more about special education and to feel that I havemade a difference in special education." - Regular Education Teacher

"Address problems with my locality between special and regular education." - Special Education Teacher

"Provide research that shows us the most effective way to provide all children with a world class education." - School Board Member

"Class size will be structured so that every child will have an opportunity to learn in a small vs. larger class." - Parent

"Equity across disabilities with an empirical basis versus philosophical perspective, and curriculum (e.g. needs) as basis for grouping vs. grouping by disability category." - Department of Education Staff

In summary, since stakeholders have a wide range of research backgrounds and research experience, researchers need to become "research methods teachers", besides designing and conducting research projects. Sufficient financial and human resources must be available to the project in order to make stakeholder involvement beneficial; strong administrative and interpersonal skills are necessary. The expectations of stakeholders must be monitored because unrealistic and unmanageable expectations are easily developed.

Educational and Scientific Implications

Special education is sensitive to stakeholders (e.g. parents, students, professional special education associations etc.), so the use of stakeholders in the research process appears to be natural. Therefore, this research has significant educational and scientific implications for those who are considering using stakeholders when conducting research. Educators considering using stakeholders in a research project should be aware of the benifits of using a large group of stakeholders, as well as the administrative, financial, and emotional challenges. The specific role that stakeholders will play in the research process perhaps is best determined before the group is established, and explained to stakeholders before they agree to participate; this role should be clearly articulated and maintained. The strategy of including all possible state stakeholder groups needs to be

balanced with the length of the project, the needs of the specific project, and project's expected outcomes. The monetary cost of using stakeholders in a research project needs to be calculated beforehand to establish if the costs are justified and will make a positive contribution to the project. Although the idea of using stakeholders may be conceptually appealing to special education practitioners, they should carefully considered how and when stakeholder participation in a research project will enhance the project's outcomes.

Researchers involved in a project that uses stakeholder groups need to be in aware of the different perspectives and different hats that they wear. Stakeholders view researchers from a variety of perspectives: from experts in research, to people who need to be told what to do, how to do it, and when to do it. If a project does not have pre-established stakeholder role definitions and other administrative structures established, the researchers may find themselves as the scapegoat for difficulties experienced in the project. Researchers need to listening and integrating stakeholders ideas, yet, be methodically competent enough to develop a sound research design for the project. The research design should be such that policy analysts will be able to interpret the results and translate the results into policy implications at the conclusion of the project.

Finally, practitioners and researchers involved in projects using stakeholders need to be thick-skinned, skilled managers of resources and personnel, talented communicators of research methods, and committed to the concept of using stakeholders in research.

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